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Jonathan Wordsworth (1932–2006)

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The greatest debts cannot be repaid, only acknowledged. Jonathan Wordsworth was a teacher of genius; and when he died on 21 June 2006 left deeply and richly in his debt many members of Temenos, as well as generations of undergraduate and graduate students at Oxford, and innumerable participants in the Summer Conferences and Winter Schools organized by the Wordsworth Trust at Grasmere. His critical work on the poems of his great-great-great uncle, William Wordsworth, which were embodied above all in *The Music of Human?ity* (1969), in *Wordsworth and the Borders of Vision* (1982) and in his edition of the two-part *Prelude* of 1798–9, remains some of the most valuable in existence, full of close observation, good-humoured sensitivity, and an unparalleled knowledge of the detail of Wordsworth's writing.

But it was Jonathan's presence which impressed and delighted above all, and which will be missed most by those he taught and befriended. I first met him in Oxford in 1966 in strange circumstances. I was being *viva'd*—examined *viva voce* on my Finals papers by a panel of some dozen begowned examiners who were considering whether or not to award me a first class degree—and I was having a bad time. The committee was chaired by a famously ferocious Shakespeare scholar, who had taken exception to my paper on Shakespearean drama. Under the bludgeoning of her questions I suffered a mental blank and began to founder. Jonathan, who had not taught me and whom I did not know, detected that something was wrong and found a pretext to suspend my *viva* over lunchtime. He also (as I learned much later) slipped out of the room and telephoned my tutor, suggesting that he take me out to lunch and calm me down. The prescription was duly followed, I returned after lunch in good form, and all went swimmingly. Without this charitable intervention my subsequent career might have been very different.

Such decisiveness was typical of Jonathan Wordsworth. He lived on the grand scale, he radiated generosity and learning, and he was never one to let convention or petty regulations stand in the way of truth,

justice or humanity. His deep and resonant voice was the perfect vehicle for the reading of poetry; it was equally effective for the dropping of startling observations which usually managed to be simultaneously abrasive, compassionate and humorous. It could also carry effortlessly over the general hubbub of a party; as on the memorable occasion when, asked by a hostess if he would like red wine or white, he replied in a perplexed tone, 'Is there any other kind?' It was symbolic of his robust attitude to existence that he could never see white wine as a drink for grown-ups.

Such qualities made him a matchless tutor and supervisor to students at St Catherine's College, Oxford, where he taught for more than a quarter of a century. He took endless pains with his students and taught many hours beyond those assigned to him, a practice he maintained into retirement, continuing to teach unofficially in his own home after he had left his Fellowship. The inspiration of his teaching carried a long way. Many of the present day's leading scholars of English Romanticism were taught by him, and it was in great part his profound belief in the importance of poetry, and in the human and spiritual value of the literature he read and discussed with them, which sustained this area of English studies through a period when the fashion for deconstruction and an obsession with superficial economic and political theorizing threatened it with permanent damage.

He also played an immensely important role, first as Trustee and later as Chairman, in the development of the Wordsworth Trust at Grasmere, where he was the perfect companion, foil and sparring-partner for Robert Woof, the Director. Robert was another scholar of genius and, like Jonathan, a powerful character of enormous charm, wit and learning. Together they oversaw a golden age in the development of the Trust, turning Dove Cottage from a minor outpost of literary heritage into one of the country's leading museums and galleries and a powerhouse of literary, artistic and scholarly endeavour, hosting poets and painters, training budding curators and supporting a range of scholarly projects.

It was through Dove Cottage that Jonathan's links with Temenos were first forged. As a long-standing De Quincey enthusiast, he willingly became one of the advisory editors for the complete edition of De Quincey's works on which I embarked in 1989. Soon afterwards, he invited Kathleen Raine to lecture on Blake at the Wordsworth Summer

Conference. They became friends, she was invited again, and in due course Jonathan and his wife Jessica (and later their children) became regular visitors at Kathleen's house in Paulton's Square, where Jonathan (always ready to turn his hand to a useful practical job) became the appointed coal-scuttle-filler and fire-layer on Friday mornings.

Subsequently Jonathan was invited to lecture at the Temenos Academy and to take seminar groups, for the most part studying the poetry of Wordsworth. Delightfully, some of his former students from the Oxford past were able to return and sit at his feet again in this new setting, finding that his wit and eloquence had lost nothing with the passage of time. Jonathan also joined the Temenos Academic Board, where he observed the proceedings quizzically, contributing occasional nuggets of wisdom; though he remained mildly puzzled that it was not possible for him to drive his car, on time and without hindrance, into Lincoln's Inn Fields for the meetings. In this and some other details one occasionally felt that he was a visitor from an earlier and more expansive time.

His final illness came relatively suddenly and to most his death was unexpected. Temenos was lucky to share in his gifts; those who heard him lecture or who joined his seminar groups will not forget him; and our sympathy and friendship go to Jessica and his children.